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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BIASES, BINARIES, AND BELONGING: GENDER IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Abstract

Contemporary Indian children's literature has witnessed a marked shift in its representation of gender. Departing from earlier narratives that normalised obedient femininity, dominant masculinity, and the erasure of queer identities, recent texts increasingly expose gender as a social construct sustained through repetition, discipline, and unequal power relations. This article examines how Mayil Will Not Be Quiet, Queen of Ice, and The Boy in the Cupboard challenge the cultural processes through which children learn to perform gender from an early age. It argues that childhood is one of the primary sites where ideas of femininity, masculinity, bodily respectability, and acceptable desire are first imposed and internalised. By foregrounding issues such as body surveillance, gendered expectations, behavioural policing, female agenc y, and queer visibility, these narratives disrupt the assumption that gender roles are natural or inevitable. They also reimagine family and social spaces as locations where inherited norms may be questioned rather than simply reproduced. In doing so, contemporary Indian children's literature transforms the child from a passive recipient of patriarchal values into an active subject capable of interpreting and resisting them.

Introduction:-

Children's literature in India did not arise in the form of an unbiased imaginative space. Earlier narrative traditions, whether canonical collections such as the Panchatantra or widely circulated popular formats like the Amar Chitra Kath and Chandamama, created a highly stratified society in which gender and sexuality were limited to predetermined and unchallenged assumptions. Male characters appeared in these stories as the paragon of rationality, authority, and agency, while female ones took a much narrower form of sacrifice, obedience, or moral degradation. Moreover, queer characters were completely erased, with heterosexuality presented not as one type of relations among many, but as the only conceivable form of desire and belonging. Both processes of stereotyping and exclusion have become structural features normalizing the hierarchies of gender and heterosexuality in the very imagination of childhood reading. This exclusion results from ideological intent which can be seen in the way early Indian children's literature represented social conditioning of a young individual and their integration into the system of beliefs, values, and attitudes that dominated the society. Through limiting the imagination to socially appropriate narratives, these texts define what should be regulated(femininity), what should be supported(masculinity), and what should never come to be(queerness). What distinguishes modern Indian children's

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literature from its predecessors however, is that it no longer views childhood as an inactive period of moral education. Rather, children's literature today realizes that issues relating to gender, identity embodiment, and power are not something one suddenly begins thinking about as an adult; rather, they are already being formed during childhood. To ignore such issues is to create further ignorance, and therefore, modern texts now tackle issues previously viewed too explicit for young minds including topics like gender fluidity, self-sovereignty, domestic abuse, and sexuality. Far from overwhelming the child, modern stories incorporate complex issues in a way that allows children to remain curious instead of ignorant.

Contemporary Indian children's literature in India is no longer limited by its expansion of representation but has transformed into something much bigger. It has become a tool to challenge society rather than conform to it. By moving away from rigid notions of gender and sexuality, they create room for doubt, inquiry, and diversity. Most significantly, they have ceased to regard the child as passive, and acknowledge the active and intellectual capability of the child. Within this transformation, texts such as Mayil Will Not Be Quiet (2014), The Boy in the Cupboard (2021), and Queen of Ice (2014) exemplify how feminist and queer interventions operate across narrative, thematic, and epistemological levels. Rather than just including marginalized identities, they question the very conditions that made such marginalization possible.

Mayil Will Not Be Quiet (2011):-

While Mayil Will Not Be Quiet by Niveditha Subramaniam and Sowmya Rajendran follows a child's coming-of-age journey, it simultaneously rethinks childhood as site from which dominant structures may be questioned. Gender, bodily regulation, and inherited social assumptions are presented as ideas vulnerable to scrutiny aligning with the claims of Anurima Chanda who stated that the twenty-first century Indian children's literature has shifted from "didactic and moralistic"(Chanda 85) storytelling toward more plural frameworks attentive to marginal voices and questioning. The diary structure of the text gives Mayil a relatively free space of articulation where adult authority is temporarily suspended. This diary becomes a place of interpretation on her own terms. This perspective becomes crucial when she confronts normalized patriarchal values such as her discomfort with a son preference in the Dashratha narrative probably due to lineage politics revealing how irrational such traditions appear when viewed through a child's eye who has not yet fully internalised socially constructed ideologies. Her questioning becomes a feminist gesture revealing that gender preferences survive through repetition rather reason.

The text also shows how gender is produced through ordinary and everyday life choices that may seem little. Dolls are assigned to Mayil while karate to Thamarai, her younger brother. Such distribution suggests that gender roles are socially allocated rather than naturally emerging. Thamarai's resistance to karate and his interest in activities labelled as feminine provoke ridicule, particularly through the term sissy. This reflects what Dr. Komal Yadav identifies as "heteronormative policing" (Yadav 24), where individuals are pressured to conform to socially allocated gender roles. Yet the text also exposes the weakness of this enforcement by showing Mayil respond to Thamarai's attachment to a doll without any judgement. She puts her brother's preferences over society's categorization. The tension between personal preferences and social administering becomes lucid in the train chapter where Mayil encounters someone who does not fit into the binary expectations of the society. Fear and discomfort circulate collectively with passengers avoiding them, and Mayil's father encouraging similar distance. Her early understanding of this individual is mediated through peer language, rumours, and other stereotypes such as the term "eunuch" (Subramaniam and Rajendran16) being casually used to describe them. Zainabaunt's interruption however, demonstrates that curiosity and understanding becomes the crux of getting out of the cocoon where one is trained to follow only what is socially acceptable.

The body is likewise presented as a socially regulated space where beauty standards, fairness creams, and peer's remarks reveal how early a girl is subjected to assessment. Mayil's discomfort with her stomach and changing body, even refusing to call breasts with its name because of how weird it sounds to her, reveals her distance from accepting who she is. And this may come from a place of constant judgement and unconscious comparison. Even the representation of menstruation is sometimes shown in light of reproductive identity or how adults consider it as becoming a "big girl" (Subramaniam and Rajendran46). Hence emphasising the idea that girl child is expected to behave maturely as soon as she hits puberty even though they are essentially just children. However, such a narrative is disrupted when her mother encourages her to look beyond what people say and focus on what she decides of herself. She assures her that the agency to decide how she is rests purely on her and no one else while actively validating her by telling her that she is beautiful. In such cases, family emerges out of the earlier conception of regularity and authority, and transcends into a nurturing unit. Even among the surveillance of the mother when

Mayil lies to watch a movie, there lies care and compassion. The father who initially appears to be influenced by societal prejudices later teaches Mayil to defend herself and speak if harmed. His eventual acceptance of Thamarai's desire to pursue dance also represents how one can break the chain of societal expectations by being open and accepting. Ultimately, Mayil Will Not Be Quiet shows that gender norms lose their inevitability once examined through an unbiased perspective and questioning. It also emphasises the need to change perceptions as time changes and create environments where children feel safe and welcomed within spaces traditionally viewed as regulated and strict.

Queen of Ice (2014):-

Queen of Ice by Dr. Devika Rangachari, published in 2014, challenges the conventional divisions of morality and prescribed gender roles. It reshapes the representation of female identity and what child readers are encourage to expect. Instead of presenting an ideal female protagonist defined by goodness and obedience, the novel portrays Didda as determined, politically astute, and at time uncompromisingly ruthless. Her character is inspired from the real historical queen of Kashmir, placed within the intersectionality of being a female and disabled, who rejected culturally sanctioned femininity designed via passivity, beauty, emotional compliance, and moral softness. She focuses on political authority and strength instead. By presenting such a character, Dr. Rangachari actively breaks the historical connection between femininity and innocence, often seen in real life and literature as well.Her father's statement, "A woman doesn't rule Didda. Only a man can occupy a throne" (Rangachari 25), might seem like a personal prejudice against women. However, when a person which such an ideology is at power, it influences a whole lot of people and doesn't remain private anymore. Marriage likewise becomes a transaction in the life of women as evident in Vigragharaja's declaration: "You are being sold, Didda. Your father has sold you for a paltry bit of land" (Rangachari 29) Queen Didda, literally and literary, went against this framework and refused to commit Dati when her husband died. She was met with a lot of criticism with the famous medieval chronicler Kalhana calling her a "disgrace to the women kind for doing so" (Beig 150). However, her later assertion, "I am now king and queen in one. Kashmir belongs to me and mine only" (Rangachari 149), challenges her father's earlier comment proving that a ruler doesn't have any gender. She herself embody the qualities of both the king and the queen, and confidently claims agency over Kashmir.

The novel rejects the conventional understanding of morality by refusing to present Didda as either right or wrong. In fact, she represents the true human who is composed of both sides of morality and values equally and learns to regulate and mediate between them. This also provokes a question as to why are female characters expected to fit into categories where they are either too good- implying they are obedient and passive, or villainous- implying they speak up for themselves and doesn't follow what society forces them to do while male characters are termed heroic and strong for doing the same. Voice is equally significant because the narrative sides with those who gets to narrate the story. Didda and Valga speak for themselves, refusing to be objects of history. Dr. Rangachari herself stated in "Devika Rangachari on her book Queen of Ice" that her interest emerged from dissatisfaction with male-centred histories that reduce women to decorative margins (Parag An Initiative of Tata Trusts 01:38). The text may therefore be read as a feminist historiographic recovery. All in all, the novel dismantles the assumption that children require neat moral binaries and passive heroines. Instead, it presents them as intellectually capable of engaging with female ambition, political ruthlessness, and ethical ambiguity. Additionally, it also presents women in their full capability instead of showing them as weak and compliant.

The Boy in the Cupboard (2021):-

Harshala Gupte's The Boy in the Cupboard, published in 2021, takes this exploration further by focusing on how a child comes to understand and inhabit a sense of self that does not align with expected norms. In carefully following the experiences of the child, the text illustrates how the process of identity formation is both influenced by ordinary life events and emotions, and shaped by the constraints placed upon it. It raises the question of how the 'normal', far from being something we learn about, is also something we are expected to inhabit, perform, and constantly negotiate. When Karan retreats into the cupboard, he is not just escaping other children but also seeking a space where he can exist without judgement. As he says, "In here, I am who I always thought I'd be" (Gupte 5). Sarkar similarly observes in Queer Visibility in Indian Picture Books that "Karan finds himself safer and happier inside the cupboard," (p.18) where is able to drape a saree and twirl freely without fear of ridicule. The cupboard thus functions as a counter-space that resists dominant norms and unsettles the conventional metaphor of 'coming out' as movement from darkness in to light. In the narrative, the external world is marked by hostility and rigid expectations, while the enclosed interior becomes the only place where authenticity is possible. This reversal

portrays how spaces are socially coded and regulated, suggesting that selfhood is not always secured through visibility, but sometimes through refuge from surveillance.

Karan is mocked for his "pink bat" and "kitchen set" (Gupte 8). Karan's statement, "I twirl with joy… they laugh, those boys" (Gupte 6), captures how even ordinary gestures are supposed to be monitored so that others don't see you as an 'outcast'. The issue is not the act of twirling itself, but what it comes to signify within a rigid gendered system that associates grace, softness, and playfulness with femininity, and therefore treats them as inappropriate for boys. Objects such as toys and colours similarly become coded markers through which children are sorted into acceptable identities. By showing how harmless gestures and preferences provoke hostility, the text exposes the fragility of gender norms, which must be constantly defended through policing even in everyday play. The family, however, becomes a site of affirmation rather than a socializing authority. Karan's mother reassured him that there is nothing to fear marking a transition from regulation to acceptance. In the later scenes, both the mother and the father are seen playing with the same kitchen set Karan was mocked for. The imagery of the parents extending a welcoming hand through the cupboard keyhole shows how family support can bring light into moments of darkness for a child, thus forming their self-confidence and self-esteem. Through this narrative, queer intervention in Indian children's literature works on multiple levels: it exposes normativity as socially constructed, reclaims spaces associated with marginality, and reimagines what forms of identity and belonging become possible for the child.

Conclusion:-

The most important intervention made by contemporary Indian Children's Literature lies in the refusal to treat gender as natural, fixed, or beyond questions. Rather than presenting masculinity and femininity as stable identities to be accepted and performed, these texts reveal how gender is produced through repeated expectations, social rewards, silences, and punishments from an early age. Childhood emerges as one of the first spaces where these norms are taught- through family structures, bodily discipline, language, behaviour, and ideas of respectability.

It does more than diversify representation as it unsettles the very structure through which gender inequality is normalised. Its radical potential lies in addressing readers at the stage when social roles are first internalised. If earlier texts often trained children to inherit patriarchy unquestioningly, these newer narratives invite them to interrogate it. In that sense, their greatest achievement is not merely that they portray different kinds of children, but that they imagine a future in which children are no longer asked to perform gender, but are free to define themselves beyond it.

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